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ABSTRACT

This occasional paper discusses and examines the role of museums as an essential part of history education. The report describes how the nature of museum exhibitions have changed in presenting history to the public. Museums offer a wider variety of presentations and interpretations than the linear, chronological history of years past. New research discoveries have increased public knowledge and led to critical questions about the nature of history and interpretation. The paper cites the need for museums to be clearer about what they are doing and about what visitors should expect when they come to the museum or visit an exhibition. The paper advocates a working relationship between historians and museum personnel in order to clarify the work of the exhibit and explain the wonders and vagaries of historical research. (EH)

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OCCASIONAL PAPER

National Council for History Education, Inc.

promoting history in school and society

How the Future of History Connects with Museums

by Spencer R. Crew

The world of historians, especially those working in museums, has changed dramatically during the past year. The manner in which we present history to the public has come under very close scrutiny and challenges during that time. In some ways it is a case of our dreams coming true in unexpected ways. We have long wanted our work to have a greater impact upon the public who comes to visit our exhibitions. We wanted to influence how people thought about themselves and about the history of the nation in which they lived. We wanted our work to matter and to help push forward public appreciation of history and its importance in everyone's life.

To accomplish this goal the nature of the exhibitions we have produced has changed over the years. Once it would have been fair to characterize our presentations as public storage areas filled with objects. The point very often was to present this material either as sacred icons for reverential observation or as a topology of the progressive improvement of American society or technology over the years. Very little interpretation took place, very few critical questions were asked, and very few people were included in the story. These presentations served primarily to confirm what visitors had learned during their formal years of schooling and made for very affirming visits for many visitors to museums. The presentations argued for a very linear and progressive view of the evolution of the United States.

While this style of presentation has not been completely abandoned, museums have changed in recent decades. They now offer a wider variety of presentations and interpretations of history for their visitors. These more recent presentations have taken advantage of the new scholarship emerging in the field. They have embraced the idea that history is not merely a linear process, but one which is filled with twists and turns and new ways of looking at and understanding events. This new mode of interpretation is not necessarily intended to dismiss previous ones, but to argue that new information has emerged which has changed the way we understand and interpret some historical moments. More and more of the exhibitions which museums have created in recent years have taken into account these new research discoveries and have included that information in their presentations. The results of these efforts can be seen in wonderfully rich exhibitions in places like the Chicago Historical Society, The Atlanta History Center, The National Museum of American History, the Oakland Museum and many other institutions around the country. Those of us who work in museums believe these exhibitions which look at historical issues in new ways are exciting and make a difference in the way our visitors view and enjoy our presentations.

What has changed more recently, however, is we have learned that appreciation of these new approaches was not as widespread as we had thought. Indeed, we have found that in some quarters these ideas were seen as troubling and not in concert with the historical perspectives and expectations brought by some of our visitors. For them, our exhibitions could be problematic. They did not reinforce what these visitors had learned and come to believe was the history of the United States. Too many strange and unfamiliar events and faces were appearing in these presentations. The exhibitions sometimes offered interpretations which were at direct odds with what they had been taught. Visiting these exhibitions made them uneasy and uncomfortable. This experience also ran counter to what they had traditionally come to expect in museums. They wanted a reaffirmation and commemoration of the heroic aspects of the history of the country. They wanted their belief systems reinforced not questioned.

The concern of this important segment of our visitors has become more and more apparent in the course of the last several years. Their vision of the proper function of museums has run headlong into

the way museum professionals have begun to redefine their responsibilities. Controversies and vitriolic public debate have emerged over what is the proper role of museums in the presentation of history. Are they to primarily commemorate the past or are they to interpret it and offer new modes of examination and explication of the issues? There is no one right answer to this question. But, there is a need for museums to be clearer about what they are doing and what visitors should expect when they come to a museum or visit individual exhibitions. We have not been very good about performing this task in the past, but we need to get better about doing this in the future. Especially, if we hope to reach a broad spectrum of visitors, which is our ultimate goal.

To accomplish this end, museums must more clearly define the work of historians and the normality of reinterpretations and multiple points of view. As historians we understand that there is rarely one unassailable historical perspective about anything. We understand that our research often discovers new information which might cause us to revise our thoughts about particular events or historical moments. It is the process of performing this research and debating and sharing the fruits of that research which makes history exciting. The revisions which result are an expected and welcomed part of our work.

This is not necessarily the way in which others view history. For many people there is just one historical truth which is beyond questioning. Once you have learned what it is, there is no disputing or revising its meaning. In confirmation of this fact, I cannot tell you how many times I have recently talked with reporters who keep asking me to tell them the historical truth about a particular moment or event. What always follows is a long discussion about historical interpretation and the discovery of new information or perspectives.

In museums, we need to perform this same service for our visitors. We need to explain to them the wonders and vagaries of historical research. We also need to show them the challenges of interpretation and the different conclusions which can be drawn from the same information or from the same artifact. We need to show them that this is not a threatening process, but one which can be invigorating and exciting. It can open up whole new ways of understanding the world of our forebears and our own. We also need to let them know that by looking more closely at the historical record, we can better understand the complexity of the historical process as well as examine the commonalties and differences among Americans which makes our history so rich.

But, museums have to be very deliberate about discussing these assumptions which are self-evident to historians, but confusing to the general public. The success of museum presentations of interpretative historical exhibitions hinges on their abilities to explain themselves to their visitors. As educational institutions our role in museums is to stimulate our visitors by offering them information and ideas which encourage them to think and learn. These are important abilities to cultivate and encourage. New ideas and interpretations combined with more traditional perspectives offer a wonderful learning environment for visitors . It provides an opportunity for them to stretch and grow. Whether or not they agree with the ideas presented in the end, is less important than encouraging their abilities to critically analyze new information.

The future success of presenting history in museums revolves around this question of introducing new ideas and perspectives. Our success is also tied to our ability to make multiple perspectives an accepted and normal expectation of our visitors. In order to be representative and to attempt to serve the needs of a wide range of our visitors who are all Americans, but who may have different experiences, museums must have the flexibility to look at history from different vantage points. If we accomplish this goal, we will serve a very useful and critical role. If we are unsuccessful, we may become institutions which no one cares about or which are viewed largely in a negative manner. We play too important a role in transmitting history to allow that to happen.

***Spencer Crew** is a member and Trustee of NCHE and is Director of the National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. He gave this talk as part of a panel on "The Future of History," at the 1995 NCHE National Conference at Colonial Williamsburg, Va., on Oct 8th, 1995. The other panelists were: historian C. Vann Woodward, Yale University (emeritus); author/biographer and PBS host/narrator David McCullough; Master classroom teacher Betty B. Franks, Maple Heights, Ohio; and education specialist on technology Lynn Fontana of George Mason University.*

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